

ENTERTAINMENT : COUNTRY SINGER MARK WILLS SINGS FOR SERVICEMEMBERS AND FAMILIES

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By Rudi Williams

American Forces Press Service

ATLANTA, June 30, 2005 - Country music artist Mark Wills didn't deliver a speech during the Military Child Education Coalition lunch and opening general session here June 29, but he spoke to the more than 550 conferees in the international language: music.

To the audience's delight, Wills and his musicians spoke to the crowd through some of his hit songs, including "Jacob's Ladder," "Don't Laugh at Me," "I Do," "Back at One," and "19 Something." The two sidemen were Tom Bass on acoustic guitar and Mike Ulvila on fiddle and other string instruments.

In his between-songs banter with the audience, Wills said he jumps at the chance every time he gets a chance to travel around the world to entertain soldiers, because he considers it an honor. And he emphasized that as a lifelong habit, he calls everyone in uniform a soldier and he uses the word respectfully.

He said he was honored to have the chance to entertain at the MCEC conference. "This is something I felt extremely proud of, because one of the biggest things that's overlooked when our soldiers are deployed are the families," he told the audience. "Every night when my daughters and I say our prayers, we always pray for our soldiers. A lot of times it's overlooked that we don't pray for the families, we don't pray for the kids. They deploy, too, because, often, they don't get the chance to live in the same place for more than a few years."

Wills stayed around after his performance to autograph his "Mark Wills Greatest Hits" CD, which he'd allowed MCEC to sell at a discounted price. "We brought some CDs and we sold them to the folks here at cost, and they're selling them at the MCEC store," he told the audience. "The money they raise goes for sending (military) children to space camp. If you pick one of them up and want somebody's name put on it for Christmas or a birthday, let me know, and I'll be more than happy to do that." After autographing CDs for a long line of fans, he sat for an interview with American Forces Press Service.

Wills said he missed being a "military brat" by about two years because his father, a Vietnam veteran who served with the 101st Airborne Infantry "Screaming Eagles," got out of the Army about two years before he was born.

Since 2002, Wills has gone overseas with United Services Organization tours, including trips to Afghanistan and Iraq. "I never look at as really going into danger," he said. "I look at it as just going over to entertain our soldiers. That has always been my thinking of it. These guys are over there, and they're Americans, and we're afforded our liberties and our rights because of great men who have fought throughout our history for our freedom.

"These guys are over there fighting a war on terror and they're away from home, so we take a little piece of home to them," Wills noted. "It's just going over there and telling them thank you."

On his first trip to the Middle East, he and his band went to Kuwait, Iraq, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. "We didn't go to Uzbekistan last year, but we make that trip every year and I just got back from South Korea a few weeks ago," Wills noted. "We went over and entertained all of our soldiers in South Korea."

Wills said he hasn't experienced anything except positive attitudes from servicemembers in Kuwait, Iraq, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. "It's like everything else -- guys want to come home, guys want to be with their families, and see their kids," said the father of two daughters, Mally, 6, and Macey, 2. "But, I haven't experienced the negative side of it. People talk about how these soldiers hate it and don't believe we should be there, but I just haven't experienced that.

"I talk to them, and we spend 24 hours a day, seven days a week with them when we're over there," said Wills. "Most of them are caught between wanting to go home to see their families and be with their kids, but they also understand that they have a job to do, and they're proud to be doing that job."

Wills said he finds deployed servicemembers' attitudes to be inspirational.

"It makes me proud that somebody would sacrifice their time away from their kids and their wives, or women sacrifice time away from their husbands and their kids to go over there," he noted. "I know that it's orders, but at the same time, they're proud to be there, and that makes me proud to be an American to know that we have a group of people like that that protect our country."

Wills said he was invited to perform at the MCEC conference, "and I've made it very clear in my career that anything I can do for the military or their families, we're on board, as long as we have time and the opportunity."

"This was one of those instances where I felt like it was necessary," he said. "It was an honor to get the invitation, and we're proud to be here.

Servicemembers need to know, Wills said, that he and his country music contemporaries keep them in mind, even when they're not actually performing for them.

"I'm proud of our men and women in the military; they need to know that country music supports them," Wills said. "They see it overseas when we come over and do our shows, but they're not just in our mind when we're there. They're in our mind when we're home, or traveling around the country and see military families that come to our shows.

"They're truly a part of our heart," he continued, "and we think about them all the time and want them to know that love them and support them and will do anything for them."

Army Gen. B.B. Bell, commander of U.S. Army, Europe, and NATO's Allied Land Component Command in Heidelberg, Germany, said when Wills, or any entertainer who people look up to, goes overseas to entertain the troops, that shows that "people care enough to come their location where they're facing danger and entertain them."

It also shows the spirit of America, the general noted. "That's what's so important to all of us - just bringing America to the soldiers," Bell said. "That's what the whole country music industry has done so powerfully in this war. They've brought America to our soldiers."

Servicemembers hear every day that America supports them, and they believe that, Bell said. "But when a real American come in and sits down with them on the battlefield, then they know it for sure," he added. "So it's very important, not just the entertainment piece, but just connection piece. That's what Mark does, and that's what all these great entertainers do when they decide to give a few days of their lives to go out and sit down with our soldiers, entertain them, and just be with them, and just bring a piece of America," Bell said.